Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

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Editor: Shirley Thomson (o. 284-1166; h. 284-2995)

Vol. XVII, No. 1
January 1990

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Here we are at the beginning of another year, and we take time to review our past activities and to plan some new ones for 1990.

A new activity for us is the rotating historical display case at the remodeled Lucky Store (outside the store, on the west wall) at the Plaza Center. Bill and Irma Somerton, who are in charge of this project, have lined up a series of local topics to be featured every two months. Currently the display features Old Lafayette and the Elam Brown story. We have lots of materials in our archives which we plan to share with you. Take a look at the display the next time you are near the Lucky store.

We are still working with the City of Lafayette on designating a location for a historic building some day. The City and the Parks and Recreation Commission have been cooperative with us in analyzing the merits of various pieces of property owned by the City. The search is on; we are making progress.

The annual dues for 1990 are requested again--at the same rate as 1989, $10 per family per year. See the attached notice. Thank you for your prompt response to build up our reserves and to keep our membership list up to date.

Best regards,

Oliver D. Hamlin

WALKING TOURS

A number of dedicated walking tour guides led by our intrepid Betsy Willcuts have for some years done some of the Society's best work: They have brought Lafayette history to life for fourth-grade students. Their stories make the personalities vivid and the old times relevant when they take the children to walk on the grounds and experience the feeling of the places of Squire Brown's community.

The local history segment of the California history program for fourth-graders in Lafayette is notable for the cooperative efforts of the Lafayette School Board and the Society. For the resulting good local history instruction, much thanks is due Pat Gowdy who worked tirelessly to make this program a memorable one for the children. Best wishes to Pat and her family on their move to Boston.

The Society welcomes Mary McCosker, newly elected member of the Lafayette School Board, to the program. Her perspective as an educator, Lafayette native, and Happy Valley School parent will be invaluable.

LHS is planning to make video recordings of special 1990 walking tours. Besides a video record of the children's tours, plans are being made to tape some more detailed and wider-ranging adult tours to be led by old hands such as Bill Wakeman, Ray Peters, and others.

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1989-90 BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS

Jack Bailey ..... *Cor. Sec. / Membership / Dir.*
Ruth Dyer ..... *Recording Secretary / Sales / Dir.*
George Ely ..... *Dir.*
Oliver Hamlin ..... *President / Dir.*
Nancy Holtzapple ..... *Treasurer / Dir.*
Dick Johnston ..... *Annual Potluck Dinner*
Sandy Kimball ..... *Publicity*
Ray Peters ..... *Vice Pres. / Plaza Park / Dir.*
Bill and Irene Somerton ..... *Archives / Clippings / Dir.*
Shirley Thomson ..... *Newsletter / Dir.*
Irene Van Overveen ..... *Dir.*
Joseph (Jop) Van Overveen ..... *Dir.*
Bill Wakeman ..... *Landmarks / Dir.*
George Wasson ..... *Program / Fire Engine*
Betsy Willcuts ..... *Walking Tours*

HISTORY DISPLAYS

Bill and Irene Somerton have already set up their first display of the year in the wall case (west wall) at Lucky's in Plaza Center. The fitting first subject is Elam Brown's Lafayette.

Various materials and photographs will be shown in the months to come as LHS attempts to make artifacts and photos available to members and the public.

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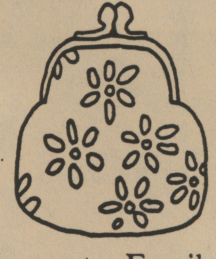

O CALIFORNIA!
Pictorial History Book Fundraiser

The Society thanks those members who placed orders in Decembr for the beautifully illustrated new history published by Bedford Arts Publishers. The publishers have contributed $10 to LHS for each book purchased by our members.

DUES FOR 1990

It's time once again for dues payment. Family membership is $10 per year; business membership, $50; student membership, $2.50. Life memberships are available at $100. Checks should be made payable to Lafayette Historical Society and mailed to P.O.Box 133, Lafayette.

Please see the membership information form at the end of the newsletter.

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THE NUMBERS GAME

by Ray Peters

As part of its relentless pursuit of historical accuracy, the Lafayette Historical Society wishes to announce a correction that should be made to all calendars within its jurisdiction. Failure to make said correction may result in expulsion.

This Society—along with the remainder of the Western world—some time ago adopted a numbering system in accordance with the base ten, probably used originally because the ancients had ten fingers. Early man soon found that if he started counting with the number "one" on the thumb of the left hand, the arrival of the number "ten" was coincident with the little finger of the right hand (assuming he was left-handed).

The new decade does not arrive until 1991.

It was determined very early that the numbering of years was a great convenience in marking the vintage of wine, so the system was quickly adapted to the calendar. Early attempts were awkward, however, because those unclear on the concept tended to regard each new year as a lesser number (possibly because each passing year meant the calendar maker had fewer years of his life remaining).

The practice of diminishing years was abandoned in the year 1 B.C.—much to everyone's relief—for several reasons, not all of which are known; one reason was surely the fact that there were no smaller numbers. (The early system was reinstituted in recent years in rocket launching countdowns.)

Revelers on New Year's Eve in the year 1 B.C. suffered a dilemma: Should the following year be called "0." It is not known if the year zero ever existed. Zero is nothing. Therefore, the year zero itself could not be recorded; could anything have transpired in year zero?

The first year that appears after 1 B.C. is 1 A.D.—conveniently timed to the birth of Christ, the precise date of which has not been definitely confirmed as of this writing. (We are working on that problem.) The year 1 A.D., therefore, was the first year of the new decade. Since a decade, by definition, is ten years, the last year of the first decade was 10 A.D., and the first year of the second decade was the year 11.

Confusion on this issue resurfaced at the beginning of 1990. Although it has not been widely recognized, 1990 cannot be considered the first year of the nineties; it is the final year of the eighties. The new decade does not arrive until 1991.

The problem will be further compounded at the close of the century. Just as the first century of the common era began in the year 1, so must the twenty-first century begin with the year 2001 (no matter what Lawrence Welk says).

Is the ruling within the scope of the Lafayette Historical Society? Of course. As long as there are calendars, your Society will be there. Watch this space for further developments in the continuing crisis.

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Editor's note: Thanks go to Ray Peters for this piece. If you have an article, please give me a call (284-2995). Contributions are welcome.

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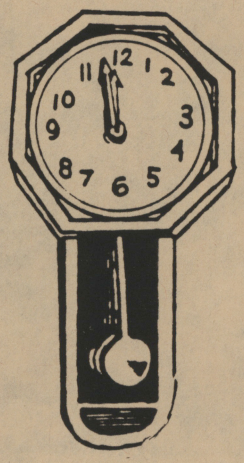

BOARD MEETING: Next meeting of the Board and committee chairs is set for March 14 at 7:30 p.m. at the home of Nancy Holtzapple (283-5148). Any member welcome. Please call Nancy for directions.

MORE NUMBERS GAMES: CENSUS YEARS

In 1845 the "foreign" population of Mexican California was 680; Mexican population was a little less than 7,000. Five years later, the U.S. census counted more than 92,000 people in the state. Unfortunately, the 1850 census has been lost, but a partial state census for 1852 exists.

The Contra Costa central library has county reports for 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, and 1910 on microfilm. (The 1890 report was destroyed by fire.)

Reading the census lists, particularly old reports such as the June 1860 Township Two enumeration, can give the reader a fresh sense of the reality of Lafayette pioneer families and a feeling of the country neighborhood this was then. The names come to life as flesh and blood folks: There are Elam and Margaret Brown, at age 62 and 65 (entry #485); Isaac Hunsaker (#447); Sylvanus Hough (#462); the Benjamin Shreve family (#480); blacksmith Peter Thomson (#489); various McNeil and Allen family entries, and other well-known Lafayette names.

A count of a different kind, a very informal one, was done in the early 1860s when noted historian Hubert Howe Bancroft hired a man named Knight to do an survey of local communities. Bancroft wanted information on the towns—their populations, hotels and hotel rates, historical notes, officials' salary figures—for use in a travel guide for Pacific states which he was preparing. Knight's casual methods included sending blank forms to towns and post offices and requesting that a local official or postmaster complete and return the form. The responses add color to the picture of the little towns the U.S. Census reports produce.

The following items are some bits and pieces reported by Contra Costa County Historical Society researchers in a publication of the CCCHS, the spring 1974 issue of *Contra Costa County Chronicles* (pp. 29-30); they are taken from the original materials preserved by Bancroft Library in the Knight Scrapbooks of the H. H. Bancroft Collection.

Clayton (reported by Joel Clayton):

- 139 voters resident
- Three hotels in town; hotel rates $1.00 to $1.50

Danville (reported by H. W. Davis, postmaster):

- 20 people residing in the town as of Jan. 1, 1862
- 200 voted in the last election

Lafayette (reported by Dr. C.S. Coleman):

- 70 people residing in the town
- 168 in the precinct

Somersville (reported by George P. Scammon):

- 250 residents of town as of Sept. 25, 1863
- 96 voters at last election

Walnut Creek (reported by J. R. McDonald, postmaster):

- No statistics

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Lafayette and the plaza, about. 1910

Left to right: The Geils building, Pioneer Store, Stark's meat market, Lamp's hotel, Peter Thomson's blacksmith shop.

CHAP'S DRIVE-IN

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. There is ample evidence that "historicalness" is also subject to individual perspective. The run-down and long-empty building that used to be Chap's drive-in restaurant at 3640 Mt. Diablo Boulevard provides an example.

Following the December 27 *Contra Costa Sun* article covering the history of the site and plans for the drive-in's demolition, LHS received an inquiry from 12-year-old Ryan Terry of Moraga regarding the building. While many older readers are likely to agree with the sentiments expressed by Mayor Richard Holmes noted in the newspaper article (". . . can't wait to see the old dilapidated building come down"), Ryan sees the building as an authentic and worthy representative of the rocking fifties, the days of car-hops and soda and sandwich stands. Would

there be, he wondered, "some sort of ceremony in memory of Chap's restaurant for people like my mother who enjoyed it while it lasted."

Ryan makes a good point. He set the LHS Board to thinking, even to wondering, too, about some kind of ceremony. Whether the place is an eyesore or historic site is a question for the beholder to answer. But demolition is imminent; expect to see a gathering at 3640 Mt. Diablo on the day the bulldozer arrives.

Thanks to Ryan Terry for caring, for writing, for remembering the special aspects of a place and a time gone by.

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WE REMEMBER . . .

Ada Brown, widow of Ken Brown and noted horse trainer and teacher, died December 27. The Browns, owners of Rolling Ridge Ranch in Lafayette for many years, will be long remembered. Ken, seen in the photograph above with Ada, died in 1987.

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WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Margot Alexander
Marechal & Doris Duncan
Stan & Mariette Franke
Frances Hunt
Scott Talan

LHS Life Member Roll

Ruth Dyer
Mary Flanders
Joseph & Jane Gregory
Oliver & Virginia Hamlin
William & Mary Ann Hoisington
James & Jane Moore
Ray & Barbara Peters
Robert & Frances Schroder

You are cordially invited to attend a

Dancing Party

to be given by Lafayette Improvement Club at the Lafayette Auditorium on Saturday Evening, May 3, 1924
The usual subscripion: $1.50 per couple and extra Lady 50 cents each. Supper is included
Good Music
This invitation is extended to any friends you may bring with you

Member of Club will Please Sign

SOCIAL ITEMS IN AN EARLIER DAY

Reported in the Contra Costa Gazette, Jan. 16, 1897:

Mr. G. Graham, temporarily of Danville, was in town the other day on business.

Mr. William Sprake, a handsome young swain of Orinda, gave a hop and led the cotillion with the bell of Clair Mountain. His chum was not in it.

E. J. Brady of Oakland is registered at the hotel Lafayette.

Mr. Boardman, of our caravanserai, has all the requirements of a genial host.

Our bashful bachelors still have hopes as there are other leap years to come. My, but what hope! There must be a great deal of satisfaction in blind faith.

Mr. Robert McNeil gave his pet horse a coat of white wash.

The late oil developments in this community have caused a stir on the bourse of Lafayette. The price of land has risen to such a height that in order to reach them one must have airships. . . .

Mr. Peter Thomson was in Oakland during the latter part of last week.

Operations on the new Redwoods road connecting with the Alameda road have been indefinitely suspended. It is understood that the farmers, the promoters of this undertaking, will resume work early in the spring. A great deal of credit must be given them, as it was the result of their efforts that caused the Alamedans to build. They have pledged themselves to make a connection, consequently they consolidated under the head of the Moraga Road Improvement Club early in May last. They have a well organized club, and everything is managed systematically. It is composed of about 40 farmers in the Willow Spring District. These fellows are of the right stuff, grit and push, and with the aid of Supervisor Hemme expect to build this road as they are tired of traveling 25 per cent grades and paying expensive blacksmith bills, etc. I wish them success.

There is a great deal of talk in railroad circles that the C.&N.R.R. will be extended to Lafayette this spring. It is rumored that the broker Brady has become a heavy stock-broker.

School began the 11th.

If you desire a fancy gate on your garden fence, call on Mr. Joseph Hodges. He is an expert at gate making.

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Lafayette Historical Society

POST OFFICE BOX 133 LAFAYETTE, CALIF. 94549

MEMBER INFORMATION

last name _____ first name _____ spouse's first name _____

street address _____ phone number _____

city, state, zip code _____ date _____

Annual dues: Please check appropriate box, attach check in the amount shown, and mail to Lafayette Historical Society, P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549.

[ ] $10.00 - Family membership
[ ] $ 2.50 - Student membership
[ ] $ 50.00 - Business membership
[ ] $100.00 - Life membership

ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY

Collect, preserve, and make available to researchers and the public Lafayette's records, historic materials, and photographs

Disseminate historical information and encourage public interest in local history through programs, exhibits, and field trips

Maintain "Old Betsy," Lafayette's early fire engine ~~~ *Conduct walking tours*

Identify and mark historic sites ~ *Publish local history* ~ *Record and preserve oral histories*

PLEASE CHECK AREAS OF INTEREST

[ ] Archives
[ ] Landmarks
[ ] Fire engine
[ ] Telephone committee
[ ] Other:
[ ] Oral history
[ ] Photograph collection
[ ] Newspaper clippings
[ ] Walking tours
[ ] Annual potluck dinner committee

IT'S TIME TO PAY 1990 DUES – SEE FORM ENCLOSED

Annual Meeting and Potluck Dinner

Tuesday, May 8, 1990

Honoring Fiftieth Anniversary of

Acalanes High School

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, California 94549

FIRST CLASS MAIL